Different Interpretations

ENGLISH LITERATURE

Rebecca
by Daphne du Maurier

Teacher Guide
H472/02
Overview

This resource is intended as a starting point for engaging with a range of different interpretations and views of *Rebecca* by Daphne du Maurier.

The selections identified can be used as sources for understanding, support for discussions and a starting point for further reading and research; they are designed to be accessible and student friendly.

We offer a reminder here that engagement with literary criticism is only one way of approaching AO5. Excellent answers are unlikely to include more than two or three quotations from critics on any single text, and may include none. There is no requirement that students quote specific critics or literary theory in order to succeed.

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A note on JSTOR access: As several of the items listed in this document are stored on JSTOR, we should note that JSTOR does offer free access to 100 articles a month via their free personal account.

Content warning: There is exploration in the original novel, and in some of the sources referred to here, of abusive behaviour within personal relationships, and of associated acts of extreme violence.
Contemporaneous reviews

Some early reviews of Rebecca were slightly dismissive of the novel’s allegedly ‘middlebrow’ qualities, sometimes denouncing it as “women’s fiction” or “mere” gothic romance. Time and critical re-evaluation have proved these to be incorrect, of course. In 1939, the writer and critic V.S. Pritchett expressed the idea that the novel would be “here today, gone tomorrow” (Christian Science Monitor, 14 September).

Pritchett V.S. as quoted in Jordison, Sam, ‘Don’t Look Now: The “middlebrow” question,’ The Guardian, 14th October 2011

Unknown, Review in Belfast Telegraph

“This is a triumphant return to the unsophisticated fiction of Victorian romance inspired and vitalised with such drama and vividness that might have emanated from Haworth Parsonage. […] Du Maurier comes out of the comparison not as a colourless copyist but as a modern rival."

This piece praises du Maurier’s boldness in replicating and developing a style that they attribute more to the Brontës. The review commends du Maurier’s style, the characterisation particularly of Mrs Danvers and Manderley itself, as well as the novel’s engagement with memory. The review also highlighted du Maurier’s brilliant construction and work with suspense. “when the secret of Manderley comes to light [is] extraordinarily well done; the leave the reader literally breathless with excitement.”

The piece also recognises that in using these Gothic tropes, that du Maurier’s work ‘leaves itself open to criticism’ and can be accused of having all the old tricks of melodrama but praises du Maurier’s ability to maintain this dramatic and abundant Gothicism while keeping the events of the novel the right side of credible.

Find out more

Review in Belfast Telegraph, Saturday 20th August 1938
(Note: login maybe required)

Of Brontëan intensity, “Rebecca” gives a romantic freshness to the ancient themes of tortured love […] A great, mysterious house; a mysterious, sorrowing husband; a housekeeper like an evil spirit; everyone ruled from the tomb of an apparently drowned woman – it sounds perilously old fashioned; but Miss du Maurier goes at it with such gusto and with such mastery of atmosphere.

W.L.A’s review is resoundingly positive, although is just shy of predicting its enormous bestselling success. Like other reviewers, W.L.A finds resonances between Rebecca and the works of the Brontës, particularly Jane Eyre.

The review notes the pathos of the unnamed narrator and singles out this characterisation as particularly effective. It also indicates that the novel is more than the narrative of a jealous second wife but one with drama, “sinister atmosphere and ugly characters”. W.L.A does suggest that some characters, like Mrs Danvers, are ‘too horrible’ but ‘make good reading’.

Find out more
(Note: login maybe required.)

Staveley-Wadham, Rose, From Best Seller to Best Picture: Daphne du Maurier’s “Rebecca”, The British Newspaper Archive, 15th October 2020
(Note: some material from W.L.A, Charques, Cooper, as well as other papers like Dundee Courier and Daily Herald can be found in this source.)

R. D. Charques, Review in Times Literary Supplement

The conventions of a story of this kind are not the conventions of the so-called realistic novel, and it would be absurd to reproach Miss du Maurier for her fine, careless rapture. In its kind “Rebecca” is extraordinarily bold and confident, eloquent and accomplished to a degree that merits genuine respect.

Charques’ review is by turns harsh but admiring. Although famously describing it in its opening sentences as “a lowbrow story with a middlebrow finish”, Charques also calls it “an ingenious, exciting and engagingly romantic tale.” He is particularly taken with the portrait of the narrator and feels her to be a candid, passionate little creature and particularly lifelike.

Charques also notes that ‘du Maurier’s feat in unfolding the whole course of events through the mind of a single character is not to be underrated: the machinery rarely creaks and there is only a suspicion of monotony of tone.’ He, as with other reviewers, again details Maxim as having ‘a touch of the Brontë hero’. Charques’ view that the novel does not strain towards realism is altogether a position of merit, if a little damning.

Find out more
*The Times*

Unlike the house on the moor, Manderley is a mansion with modern appointments […] yet neither the modern appointments nor the bridge and the motor cars can alter the nature of a romance in which the nineteenth century obstinately persists […] And yet, with such figures as these, Miss du Maurier has evoked an atmosphere of terror […] For the sake of this Victorian spectre and its equipment of panic and foreboding it is easy to overlook the equally Victorian weaknesses of the novel.

Find out more
J.S., ‘Books of the Week: New Novels - Victorian Spectre’, *The Times*, 12th August 1938. Available in The Times Online Archive, Gale (Note: a login is required to access this content.)

Ralph Straus, “‘Rebecca’: Miss Du Maurier’s Fine Romance”,
*The Sunday Times*

It is romance in the grand tradition: a brilliantly constructed story, moving, intimate, exciting, above all, rich in surprise […] Those last chapters really are extraordinarily good; but the whole story has been beautifully managed.

Straus admits that the first half of the novel generated more criticism for him, partly in response to the hype around the novel on its publication. He lists questions he was asking of the text, often about the credibility of the plot of the novel and whether it “smack[ed] too much of the stage”. He credits the fancy dress party as a turning point both in the novel and his perception of it. In Straus’ opinion, the pace of the novel improves and that the secrets and shocks “none of which strains your credulity” but keep the reader “in an almost painful suspense”.

Find out more
Straus, Ralph, “‘Rebecca’: Miss Du Maurier’s Fine Romance”, *The Sunday Times*, 7th August 1938. Available in The Sunday Times Online Archive, Gale (Note: a login is required to access this content.)
Lettice Cooper, ‘Holiday Fare: Grave And Gay’, The Yorkshire Post

Here are all the furnishings of one of those ‘horrid’ romances which Catherine and Isabella Thorpe devoured [...] Here are mystery, horror, a fluently told tale, an unexpected development.

This review begins with quotations from Jane Austen’s famous satire of the Gothic Northanger Abbey. Pithy and to the point, Cooper is broadly dismissive of the novel while drawing a clear line of inspiration from Ann Radcliffe’s work to that of du Maurier’s. Cooper’s main objection seems to be an old charge levelled at Gothic fiction wherein characterisation does not capture credible ‘human nature’.

**Find out more**
Cooper, Lettice, ‘Holiday Fare: Grave And Gay’, Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer, Wednesday 10 August 1938
(Note: login may be required.)

**Review of Rebecca in The Lincoln (NE) Daily Star**

*Jane Eyre* will be the first and inevitable comparison of those who read this thick, rich, fast and lively melodrama of a heroine whose name is never given [...] Sensational incidents cumulate in two climaxes without the slightest letdown [...] There are scenes of sharp play of wits, of high tragedy, of intense reconciliation, of fervidly restrained drama.

This largely positive review mentions the connections with Charlotte Brontë’s novel *Jane Eyre* and is keen to promote the melodramatic, exciting qualities of Rebecca. The review lingers on du Maurier’s ‘lavish’ prose and keen characterisation, as well as providing a brief overview of the novel’s plot.

**Find out more**

**An early summary in The North American Review**

[T]hrough the eyes of Maxim de Winter’s young and frightened second wife, the reader learns all about the first spouse. The persistent, though now celestial, Rebecca returns [...] Wandering in and out of the novel, peeking around chapters, there’s also an ominous female, Mrs. Danvers the housekeeper, who one learns is ‘particularly sinister’.

This pithy, condensed summary of the novel offers substantial insight into the essence of the new book (as perceived by the anonymous reviewer and as expressed in their slightly ironic tone). This short piece highlights the roles of the three female characters, spending little time on the figure of Maxim.

**Find out more**
Later analysis and criticism

Robert Y. Drake Jr., “Manderley Revisited” in The Mississippi Quarterly

In this comparatively early study - which quotes extensively from the text - Drake considers the literary status of the novel (including du Maurier’s use of language), its film adaptations, and possible different interpretations of the story.

Drake begins by reviewing his own early reading of the novel as a child and offers a brief summary of the characters and key elements of the novel noting that “surely all the elements of a Gothic romance were there transported to the twentieth century.” He also draws connections between the novel and Cinderella at its start, before the novel gets into the conflict at Manderley. The piece is more a closely considered overview of the text and potential interpretations rather than advancing much critical argument.

- “For some years I have been somewhat hesitant to acknowledge my liking for Rebecca in “literary” circles, where Miss Du Maurier is condescendingly looked on as a writer of “slick” trade fiction which sells briskly.”
- “It seems to me that Rebecca may well be considered as a study in what it means to be haunted and the price one must pay to “lay” his private fiend.”
- “…it is a measure of Miss Du Maurier’s skill that she manages to resolve the conflict in a realistic and dramatically satisfactory way; indeed the “design” of the novel seems almost perfect.”
- “Miss Du Maurier’s prose is often luxuriant but rarely lush, and she has a fine and sensitive ear for prose harmonies.”

Find out more

(Note: a login is required to access this content.)

Kathleen Butterly Nigro, “Rebecca as Desdemona”

In this fascinating article, Nigro approaches the novel as both a feminist and a Gothic document, and explores the roles of both the narrator and Rebecca in its events. Offering an alternative reading of the text that delves into the unreliability of the narrative beyond the narrator herself, Nigro makes close comparison is made with the Shakespeare play Othello (in which jealousy also plays a major part).

In her examination of whether this reading supports or undermines the text as a Gothic novel, Nigro details the ways in which Rebecca and the narrator can be said to fit into Gothic paradigms. Nigro tackles doubling, the uncanny, fears of sexual autonomy as well as imagery of wilderness vs restraint.

- “Is Rebecca really a Gothic novel, with the dead Mrs de Winter, now silenced by her husband’s jealousy, as an enclosed heroine? Maxim de Winter might be regarded as the cold manipulator rather than Rebecca.”
- “Rebecca resisted the role of the modern Gothic female […] passive protagonists at the mercy of men’s feelings and intentions.”
- “The narrator is the manifestation of the female Gothic heroine, the kind of women both Maxim and Othello must exploit to achieve their own individuality.”
- “Although there is no evidence that du Maurier used Othello as a direct model for her novel, it is obvious that the play affected her … Regardless of whether a Renaissance tragedy or a modern popular novel, the woman is still regarded to be the instigator of domestic unrest and social turmoil when seen through the perspective of male characters.”

Find out more

Nigro, Kathleen Butterly, “Rebecca as Desdemona” in College Literature (Volume 27, No. 3, 2000) – page 144 – 147
(Note: a login is required to access this content.)
Applying a theoretical lens

As stated in our introductory overview, there is no requirement for students to engage with specific fields of literary theory to succeed in their study of this text. We provide the below to give an introduction to some of the theoretical lenses academics and critics have employed when examining du Maurier’s work.

Some of the articles mentioned here may demonstrate more than one theoretical lens at once but we’ve focused on highlighting key themes of analysis. Theoretical approaches we often see with du Maurier’s work are feminist, queer and Gothic approaches. These are by no means exhaustive.

Feminist studies

In recent decades critics have become interested in approaching Rebecca from a feminist perspective, and the novel would certainly seem to reward such an investigation. The presence of three central (but very different) female protagonists, and the power relationships between them, invites such an approach.

Changes in societal structures and dynamics in the decades since du Maurier wrote the novel mean that a feminist reading of Rebecca is particularly rewarding, especially given the role played by Maxim de Winter in the lives of Rebecca, of Mrs Danvers, and of the narrator.

Auba Llompart Pons, ‘Patriarchal Hauntings, Re-reading Villainy and Gender in Daphne du Maurier’s “Rebecca”’

In this study, Auba Llompart Pons considers the intersection of Gothic and feminist readings of Rebecca, suggesting that the novel reinterprets traditional Gothic structures in the light of a new examination of gender roles within the tradition. By exploring the novel’s acts of villainy, the author suggests that these are often committed (by women and by men) as a means of perpetuating inherited patriarchal systems. She presents the idea that Maxim de Winter embodies the early twentieth-century concern about a crisis of masculinity.

Like many feminist critics of this novel, the author returns to the ‘Bluebeard’ tale when discussing Rebecca (a powerful male figure who marries a series of passive and innocent wives in succession, only to abuse and murder each one) but here suggests that – to some extent – a reversal of roles is being presented in this version of the tale.

• “As the feminist critics … have noted, Maxim’s murder of Rebecca is predominantly motivated by Rebecca’s challenging of the patriarchal rules.”

• “All the characters in the novel – including both Mrs de Winters – are willing to commit acts of villainy regardless of their gender, as means to maintain powerful positions within patriarchy. Furthermore, in Rebecca, there is no such thing as a real threat to the patriarchal system, not even on Rebecca’s part, but rather there is a constant preoccupation about its perpetuation. Thus Maxim de Winter is a more complex kind of Bluebeard.”

• “Rebecca is, in short, a story about a man’s struggle to preserve patriarchal order at all costs, even if this means committing murder.”

Find out more

Llompart Pons, Auba: “Patriarchal Hauntings: Re-reading Villainy and Gender in Daphne du Maurier’s Rebecca”, Atlantis, AEDEAN, June 2013, pages 74, 75, 81 (Note: a login is required to access this content)
Alison Light, ““Returning to Manderley” – Romance Fiction, Female Sexuality and Class’

Light offers a brief overview of the popularity of the text, its potentially unsettling ideas about class and waning empire, before summarising current readings and approaches to romance fiction that she believes must be reconfigured. She also explores the ways in which du Maurier uses features of crime writing to undercut and expose the romantic elements of her text.

Light explores the ways in which the class difference between the narrator on one side and Rebecca and Maxim on the other underpin the insecurity of the narrator’s time at Manderley. Light offers a reading of Rebecca that positions her both as ‘a figment of the [narrator’s] imagination, invented from a sense of her own social and sexual limitations’ and as transgressor. She also offers a reading of the narrative as one of not just unreliable memory but of fantasy and projection, both of Rebecca but also of the narrator herself, both figures who are ‘being simultaneously written and revised’.

- “Rebecca is a rewrite of Jane Eyre amidst a nostalgia for the waning of the British Empire and the decline of its aristocracy.”
- “Rebecca concentrates on femininity as it is regulated and expressed through class difference it illustrates and also investigates the psychic, social and fictive conditions necessary for a successful bourgeois romance.”
- “Rebecca takes the conventional romance story as its setting and as its own prologue; all the rest of the action takes place after marriage, after what traditional constitutes the happy ending of romance fiction. […] The novel becomes a thriller which goes behind the scenes of the romance drama.”
- “From being the girl’s imaginary ideal, [Rebecca] has to become her nightmarish enemy. […] The text sets up a binary opposition between the two kinds of femininity which the girl and Rebecca represent.”

Find out more
Light, Alison. “‘Returning to Manderley’: Romance Fiction, Female Sexuality and Class.” Feminist Review no. 16, 1984, pp. 7–25 (Note: a login is required to access this content)
Queer studies

The growth of Queer Studies since the 1980s has led to a body of literary criticism focusing on gender and sexuality, which challenges heteronormative readings and meanings in texts. Rebecca has often been the focus of such an approach, with critics interested not only in the dynamics of the characters within the novel itself, but also in the implications of biographical details about Daphne du Maurier’s own life.

Janet Harboard, ‘Between Identification and Desire: Rereading “Rebecca”’

In this radical study of the novel, Harboard explores the power dynamics between the characters in order to examine issues of gender and sexuality in Rebecca. Freudian Oedipal theories are cited, and heterosexual norms are challenged. Issues of gender fluidity are also incorporated (citing Rebecca’s use of the pet name “Danny” for Mrs Danvers).

In short, Harboard argues that this is a novel of ambiguity – especially in matters of sexuality and gender. The article quotes the seminal biography of du Maurier by Margaret Forster (1993) which disclosed details of the author’s emotional and sexual relationships with women.

• “…in Rebecca, the text is dominated by the girl’s fascination with, and arguably desire for, the ghostly image of Rebecca.”
• “The most passionate evocations of Rebecca come from Mrs Danvers.”
• “Marriage [in the novel] is a farce, a game.”
• “What characterises Rebecca is fluidity … What Rebecca is ultimately condemned for in the text is also what makes her appealing: her transgression of categories of class, gender and sexuality.”
• “Rebecca offers a vision of eroticism sustainable only for and between women.”

Find out more
Harboard, Janet: “Between Identification and Desire: Rereading Rebecca”, Feminist Review, Sage Publications, Summer 1996, pages 96, 101 (Note: a login is required to access this content)

Forster, Margaret: Daphne du Maurier (Arrow, UK, 1994)

Nicky Hallett, ‘Did Mrs Danvers warm Rebecca’s pearls? Significant exchanges and the extension of lesbian space and time in literature’

In this essay Hallett explores suggestions of lesbian desire in Rebecca, at the same time making a link between events in the novel and those in the poem “Warming Her Pearls” (1987) by the contemporary poet Carol Ann Duffy. The essay analyses the link between sexual, class and bodily construction in the two texts.

Hallett describes a perceived intimacy in the novel between Mrs Danvers and both Rebecca and the narrator. This essay also explores links between Rebecca and the seminal lesbian novel The Well of Loneliness (written by Radclyffe Hall ten years earlier).

• “When the new mistress and Mrs Danvers touch, the housekeeper leaves her dead, limp, cold hand in the narrator’s own … Touch animates, quite literally here, a combination of sexual and social insecurity.”
• “While the encounters between these women [all three major characters] are unsettling, this is a temporary matter – and one which the heterosexual pre-eminence of the plot counters.”
• “The space is erotically charged by the lesbian presence, current and past, and by the touching of erogenous objects, previously activated by other women’s hands.”

Find out more
Hallett, Nicky: “Did Mrs Danvers warm Rebecca’s pearls? Significant exchanges and the extension of lesbian space and time in literature” Feminist Review, No. 74, 2003, pages 41, 43, 44 (Note: a login is required to access this content)
Gothic Studies

Clearly *Rebecca* is a novel containing many Gothic elements and tropes. It fits into many historical traditions of the Gothic, but also develops the genre in new directions as it challenges many preconceptions about the genre. As already noted, it is common to hear comments that *Rebecca* bears a strong resemblance to some aspects of Charlotte Brontë’s earlier novel *Jane Eyre*, as well as references more generally to the work of the Brontë sisters.

Perceived links include: the nature of the relationship and marriage between the protagonists; the dominating presence of a former wife; the Byronic nature of the lead male figure; the influence of a main servant figure; the climactic fire scenes; and the general Gothic atmosphere. These connections are explored in a number of articles, beyond those quoted below.

**Heta Pyrhonen, ‘Bluebeard’s Accomplice: “Rebecca” as a masochistic fantasy’**

This essay returns to the connection between *Rebecca* and the Bluebeard myth. It argues that the novel turns the typical Gothic relations of dominance upside down, such that Rebecca is ultimately presented as the tyrannical figure with her husband showing the signs of masochistic self-destruction. The essay places *Rebecca* within the tradition of the Gothic ‘Bluebeard’ structure (which is explained in its Freudian context and then deconstructed).

- “Retelling the “Bluebeard” tale unavoidably reframes it. The fact that du Maurier chooses to tell a familiar tale in the context of the Gothic romance is a comfort to the reader. Yet by allowing typically what remains repressed to return in the rewriting, she turns this familiar world upside down, unsettling our assumptions about the genre.”
- *Rebecca* shows romance conventions as “deceitful clues planted by the writer to rouse the attention of the reader before disappointing his expectations; conventions are paradoxically functional in the disintegration of the genre”.
- “…du Maurier’s scathing criticism of the Gothic legacy within which she worked:”

**Find out more**

Pyrhonen, Heta: “Bluebeard’s Accomplice: Rebecca as a masochistic fantasy”, *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, Volume 38, No. 3, 2005, pages 158, 163, 164 (Note: a login is required to access this content)
Stephanie Haddad, ‘Echoes in Gothic Romance: Stylistic Similarities Between Jane Eyre and Rebecca’

Haddad’s piece focuses on the two novels specifically as examples of Gothic romance. She offers a cogent exploration of how the Gothic operates more broadly (referring to work by Robert Harris and Elizabeth MacAndrew) before examining what constitutes a Gothic romance: a relationship between the hero and heroine; dread rather than terror; for the hero to work ‘through his past evils and the darkness of his own mind to achieve some form of victory’. She also explores the overlap between the Gothic romance and what is considered to be the female Gothic.

Haddad then moves on to close readings of both texts, exploring their relationship to genre and to each other. She focuses particularly on the figures of Jane and the narrator, seeing them as pivotal to the construction of genre at work in both novels, but also explores both Rochester and de Winter as Byronic heroes. Haddad also moves toward a consideration of structure and lexis towards the latter part of her article.

Find out more


Bernadette Bertrandias, ‘Daphne du Maurier’s Transformation of Jane Eyre in Rebecca’

Bertrandias offers a slightly different reading in that it positions Rebecca as a transformation of Brontë’s novel where the central tension is not in the relationship between hero and heroine but between heroine and the Other Woman, namely the narrator and Rebecca.

She does draw comparisons between the settings, but in her view these are more carefully drawn between Manderley and Ferndean Manor rather than Thornfield. Through her consideration of du Maurier’s novel against both Jane Eyre and Bluebeard, she posits that du Maurier’s novel offers a much more complicated, nuanced and ultimately transgressive examination of identity and relationships.

Find out more

Adaptations

*Rebecca* has remained consistently popular (and in-print) ever since publication. The novel has fired the public imagination and has inspired a large number of adaptations, sequels and spin-offs. These have embraced many different genres – including radio; television and film; stage plays; novels; and even a musical and an opera.

**Film (1940)**

In 1940, the great director Alfred Hitchcock chose *Rebecca* as the subject of his first film made in the United States. The novel was adapted by Philip MacDonald and Michael Hogan with a screenplay by Robert E. Sherwood and Joan Harrison. Notably, the film was produced David O. Selznick (fresh off his success with 1939’s *Gone With the Wind*).

The film, shot in black and white, starred Laurence Olivier and Joan Fontaine. The film is fairly faithful to the novel (the major divergence being Maxim’s role in Rebecca’s death to align with the Hays Code). The film was very successful, garnering 11 Oscar nominations (winning Best Pictures and Best Cinematography), a swathe of positive critical attention and was one of the most popular films of 1940. *Rebecca* is considered a key film both in Hitchcock’s filmography and in Gothic filmmaking.

**Reviews**

Excerpts from Cohn, Herb in *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* available on Literary Ladies Guide

Nugent, Frank S., *“Splendid Film of du Maurier’s “Rebecca”*, *New York Times*, 29th March 1940

Staff review in *The Hollywood Reporter*, *Rebecca*, 21st March 1940

**Find out more**


Light, Alison, *Love to death: Hitchcock, Du Maurier and Rebecca*, *Sight and Sound*, May 1996; republished online 16th October 2020

BFI’s *Gothic in the Classroom* class resources on Rebecca (1940)

Film (2020)

In 2020, a new adaptation directed by Ben Wheatley was released on Netflix. The screenplay was written by Jane Goldman, Joe Shrapnel, and Anna Waterhouse and the production starred Lily James as the Narrator, Armie Hammer and Kristin Scott-Thomas.

This adaptation has been much less well-received, not only because the Hitchcock adaptation casts a long shadow in film history but for Wheatley’s directorial vision, as well as the new cast’s performances and the screenplay’s liberties with the original text.

Reviews


Bradshaw, Peter, ‘Rebecca review – overdressed and underpowered romantic thriller’, The Guardian, 15th October 2020

James, Caryn, ‘Rebecca review: “A pallid adaptation”, BBC Culture, 15th October 2020

Rays, Tony, ‘Rebecca returns to Manderlay, but no one’s home’, Sight and Sound, 27th October 2020

Rivera, Joshua, ‘Netflix’s Rebecca flattens a classic’, The Verge, 24th October 2020


Taylor, Matt, ‘Ben Wheatley’s Rebecca Film’, Wales Arts Review, 12th November 2020

Find out more

Newland, Christina, “In the end you can’t help but make stuff in a postmodern way”: Ben Wheatley on re-filming Rebecca’, Sight and Sound, 16th October 2020

Syme, Rachel, ‘All the Wrong Reasons to Remake “Rebecca”, The New Yorker, 24th October 2020

Stage (1939)

Daphne du Maurier herself wrote the first stage version of the novel in 1939. There were successful runs of the play in both London and New York.

An amusing review of an early stage version of the novel appears in The Australian Quarterly, Volume 13, No.4 (December 1941)

Stage (2005)

In 2005 the celebrated playwright Frank McGuinness adapted the novel for performance in Edinburgh (with some strong reviews)

Stage (1983)

The British composer Wilfred Josephs wrote an operatic version of the novel in 1983. The production was staged by Opera North.

Stage (2006)

A German-language musical adaptation of the novel originated in Vienna in 2006 (Rebecca). The production was generally considered to be a success, and the show was staged in a number of locations around the world.
Radio

There have been many radio versions of the novel (from readings to dramatisations) as well, of course, as a number of audiobooks. Perhaps the most famous radio version was the one produced by Orson Welles in the United States in 1938 as part of the Campbell Playhouse series (sponsored by the famous soup manufacturer!).

The original production included a live interview with Daphne du Maurier herself, as well as a score by the eminent Hollywood composer Bernard Herrmann.

Books

In line with a recent interest in writing sequels (or prequels) for classic novels, a number of these have appeared in recent years connected to Rebecca, including Susan Hill’s Mrs de Winter (Sinclair-Stevenson, 1993), Maureen Freely’s The Other Rebecca (Bloomsbury, 1997), Sally Beauman’s Rebecca’s Tale (Little, Brown, 2001) and Justine Picardie’s Daphne (Bloomsbury, 2008).

Television (1962)

Various early television versions of the novel were made, probably the most important one being in 1962 (Theatre 62, US) adapted by Ellen M. Violett and starring James Mason.

Television (1979)

In the UK at least two celebrated television versions have been produced. A 1979 production (BBC) included Anna Massey as Mrs Danvers.
Additional sources

By the author

Daphne du Maurier, *The Rebecca Notebook and other memories*

Dame Daphne du Maurier published this non-fiction collection *The Rebecca Notebook* which contains (among other things) a series of reminiscences about the writing and early reception of the novel. Some readers were disappointed that this slim volume contains only a few memories about the composition of the novel:

Find out more
du Maurier, Daphne, *The Rebecca Notebook and other memories*, (Virago, 1983)

By others

Gina Wisker, ‘Dangerous Borders: Daphne du Maurier’s Rebecca’

Wisker’s article looks at the novel again through a genre lens, specifically through a consideration of romantic fiction of the period. Wisker looks specifically at the power dynamics under the microscope within the novel and explores the relationship between Maxim and Manderley. Wisker’s piece situates a reading of du Maurier’s work within an understanding of her life, the conventions of romantic fiction and the political instability of the period in which she was writing.

Find out more

Angela Carter, ‘Charlotte Brontë: *Jane Eyre*’

Angela Carter, in her essay originally for a Virago edition of *Jane Eyre*, comments on du Maurier’s novel although not with much fondness.

“One of the great bestsellers of the mid-twentieth century, Daphne du Maurier’s *Rebecca*, shamelessly reduplicated the plot of *Jane Eyre*, and went on to have the same kind of vigorous trans-media after-life.”

Find out more

Olivia Laing, ‘Sex, jealousy and gender: Daphne du Maurier’s Rebecca 80 years on’

As part of a retrospective 80 years after its publication, Laing revisits the novel and offers an overview as to the circumstances from which the novel arose. Exploring the novel’s relationship to sexuality, punishment and memory, Laing also examines du Maurier’s sexuality and identity, commenting on the ways that du Maurier’s gender identity seemed a site of internal conflict, as was her subsequent romantic entanglements with women, like actress Gertrude Lawrence.

Find out more
Laing, Olivia, ‘Sex, jealousy and gender: Daphne du Maurier’s *Rebecca 80 years on*, *The Guardian*, 23rd February 2018
“Literary Trials” column from the journal *Litigation* (2010)

In this regular column, famous figures from literature are investigated or put on trial. In this article the focus is on both Maxim de Winter and his second wife as the truth about the disappearance of Rebecca is investigated (involving evidence from a boat-builder). This is an amusing and fictitious (but perceptive and thought-provoking) article.

- “Were relations between you and the late Mrs. De Winter perfectly happy?”…
- And then, out of the queer mist around me, Maxim’s voice, clear and strong. “Will someone take my wife outside? She is going to faint.”

Find out more

“Literary Trials”, *Litigation* (American Bar Association - Volume 36, No. 4, 2010), pages 67 to 68

Matthew Dennison, ‘How Daphne du Maurier wrote Rebecca’

Matthew Dennison in his piece chronicles the writing of *Rebecca* with great biographical detail regarding du Maurier’s writing career and marriage. The piece does offer some insight into the novel itself and something of a biographical reading.

Find out more

Dennison, Matthew, "How Daphne du Maurier Wrote Rebecca", *The Telegraph*, 19th April 2008 (this is also archived at the [Internet Archive](https://web.archive.org/))
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